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Galician fiddle versus tambourine

Alfonso Franco

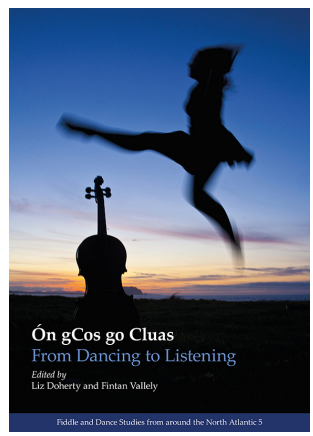
Excerpted from:

Ón gCos go Cluas
From Dancing to Listening
Fiddle and Dance Studies from around the North Atlantic 5

Edited by Liz Doherty and Fintan Vallely

First published in 2019 by The Elphinstone Institute,
University of Aberdeen, MacRobert Building,
King's College, Aberdeen, AB24 5UA

ISBN: 978-1-85752-073-6



About the author:

Alfonso Franco has a veterinary degree from the University of Santiago de Compostela (1990), a professional degree in the violin from Santiago de Compostela Conservatory (1996), and completed his doctoral studies in traditional Galician music at the University of Santiago de Compostela in 2003. A teacher of the fiddle in the Traditional Music Conservatory of Vigo, he is responsible for the string section of the Galician folk orchestra Sondeseu. He has given workshops and performances in Spain, Portugal, Newfoundland, Scotland, and in 2011 taught at Alasdair Fraser's Sierra Fiddle Camp in California. He has played and recorded with several folk and rock groups, and most recently with the concert harpist Paula Oanes and the Bulla Timpánica Trío.

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Galician fiddle versus tambourine

ALFONSO FRANCO

In Galicia, popular music played on the fiddle was kept alive throughout the centuries by blind fiddlers. The last of these musicians disappeared in the late 1970s, but some audio and video recordings have been made for future generations. Then 'folk' music took over, and a new way of interpreting traditional music on the fiddle developed, based on the blind fiddlers' style, adapting the violin technique in perfect union with the most popular musical instrument in Galicia: the tambourine. In recent years the fiddle – traditionally played only by professional musicians[1] – has, however, grown in popularity among a young public, especially in the south of the region.

Significance of percussion in Galicia

European cultures throughout their development have gradually lost the primeval part of their folklore: percussion. Thus in the northern half of Europe it is difficult to find peoples whose ancient percussion instruments have not yielded to the power of melodic refinement and the charm of western classical harmony. But Galicia, a small region in the northwest of the Iberian Peninsula, has one of the few examples of surviving percussion. This Spanish region, due to the decline it suffered during the twentieth century, and as a result of the forty-year dictatorship of Franco and poor communications with the rest of Spain, has preserved a great part of its indigenous music.

In the 1980s, musicologists Dorothé Schubart and Antón Santamarina were still able to collect, in rural areas of Galicia, hundreds of tunes whose archaic character is evident from, among other things, the lack of tuning. They also collected innumerable dances and rhythms played on percussion instruments, which were used to accompany singing. This collection includes one of the few existing audio samples of a Galician fiddler who was still playing at the time, in spite of his advanced age.[2] The variety of rhythmic patterns still alive in Galician traditional music is as rich as the number of percussion instruments used to play them: *pandeireta*, *pandeira*, *tarrañolas*, *culleres*, *charrasco*, *bombo*, *tamboril*, *caixa*, *caña*, and *castañolas*, among others.[3] This list must also include all those domestic utensils that played the role of percussion instruments when there was an urgent need for a rhythmic pattern to support the dances and *fiadeiros*[4] that, for centuries, were held in every Galician village, despite bans by the authorities and clergy. Thus, bottles, hoes, paprika cans, scythes,

sickles, grindstones, and plates helped prevent the thin thread that links us to the musical heritage of our ancestors from being cut, and made it possible for current generations to enjoy the suffusion of rhythm that is characteristic of Galician folk expression.

The fiddle in Galicia

Most traditional Galician fiddlers were storytellers and they played on the violin exactly the same tunes that they sang. They played focusing on ornamentation and sought to make their melodies fit in with the singing as much as possible. That is why, on many occasions, as can be noted in historical recordings, the fiddlers' playing presents a lack of tuning that can be put down to the fact that they constantly strived to fuse together with their singing. However, we know they were also hired to play at dances and, as it often happens with fiddlers from all over the world, in order to be heard, they had to reinforce the melody by using double stops, thus increasing the resonance of their instrument and defining the rhythmic pattern, which in the end is what dancers need to feel at ease while dancing. Unfortunately, no recording has been found yet of a fiddler playing while people are dancing. The ones we know were made either at the fiddler's home or during a *romería* after lunch, but never in a dancing atmosphere. In some of these recordings, like *Jota de Riotorto* or a very similar *muiñeira*, both interpreted by Florencio dos Vilares – the last blind fiddler of the twentieth century and a key figure to understand the style of these Galician blind storytellers – we can hear the use of double stops reinforcing the strong beats and the appropriate accentuation adopted by the man who has become the icon of Galician fiddlers.

During the late 1970s and the first years of the next decade, following the path initiated by the group of singer-songwriters *Voces Ceibes,* the folk movement emerged in several parts of Galicia. In Lugo, one of the inland provinces, a protest movement that focused mainly on singing came up as a political reaction against the past dictatorship, taking popular songs and melodies as its main sources. Another group, which based its work on instrumental music, was born in the capital, Santiago, and adopted both medievalism and a Celtic revival as traits that would differentiate them from the rest of Spain. Besides these two main trends, the so-called *Portuguese* front developed in the south aiming, as well, at escaping the unifying vision of folklore imposed during the previous regime.

The presence of the fiddle in folk bands was limited and the few players, that there were, used to take the Scottish and Irish styles as their reference model. Among other reasons, this was due to the self-hatred characteristic of that transitional period, a feeling that made us reject part of our own musical tradition at the slightest sign of its sounding like *Spanish*. Although the first work of the band Milladoiro, with Laura Quintillán, includes many pieces where the violin plays an important role, it was not until the late twentieth century that we could listen to a fiddle as a solo instrument in folk music with a clear intention of searching for a distinctive identity in the interpretation of traditional music. The first recordings were *Cantigas Galegas*, *Florencio, o cego dos Vilares* and Quim Farinha's first recordings with Fía na Roca in 1993, where he points out a new way of playing *jotas* and *muiñeiras* on the fiddle.[5]

In 1997, the newly created school of traditional and folk music, born as part of the *Escuela de Artes y Oficios* of Vigo, started to offer fiddle as one of the courses, with Quim

Farinha as the first teacher. In 1998, I (Alfonso Franco) took over and have since then been responsible for the fiddle department. Thanks to the support of the Council of Vigo, this teaching project became independent in 2008 with the new name of ETRAD (School of Folk and Traditional Music). Here, for the first time, some work is carried out on the interpretation of Galician music on the fiddle, taking the existing tradition of blind fiddlers as a starting point and incorporating new bowing techniques. The teaching of the fiddle in a school where subjects like bagpipes, popular singing and tambourine are taught involves a radical change in the approach to the learning of this instrument, which used to be exclusive to classical music. The repertoire is common to most of the instruments, so when it is interpreted by an ensemble it is essential to standardise ornamentation and stress patterns. Thus, without even noticing it, fiddle students gradually learn to incorporate into their playing certain rhythmic features that bring them closer to the accompanying percussion instruments. Fiddlers not only copy the accents and strokes of tambourines and other percussion instruments, but they do the same with the ornamentation and rhythms of the singing and bagpipes, thus following the steps of another instrument that was also traditionally played by blind musicians, the hurdy-gurdy.

Main Tambourine Rhythms

Of the many dance rhythms still alive in Galician music, we have decided not to include in this study those present in other fiddle playing styles, as we understand that their bowing techniques have been sufficiently described elsewhere and are well known. On the contrary, the rhythms characteristic of Galician music that have traditionally been interpreted only on percussion instruments are presented here translated into bowing techniques: *muiñeira, jota, pasodoble* and *rumba.*

Muiñeiras

This is a dance in 6/8 time, similar to jigs and Italian tarantellas. There is a great variety of subclasses within the category muiñeira depending on how they are danced, including c*houteira, ribeirana, carballesa*, and *redonda*.[6] Focusing on rhythm only, however, enables distinguishing two main types: *muiñeira nova* (mainly instrumental) and *muiñeira vella* (exclusive to the cantareiras' repertoire).[7] Mui*ñeira nova* is the most widely known type, considered the 'standard' variety. Both melody and rhythm are in 6/8 time, although this type is always played with a stress on the first of every three quavers, shortening the second one. To learn the stress pattern we will use a word stressed on the antepenultimate syllable – for example, 'cantaloupe' (TA-ta-ra).

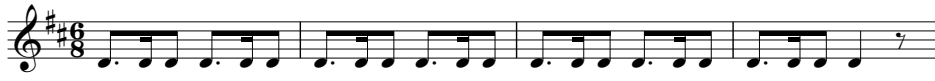
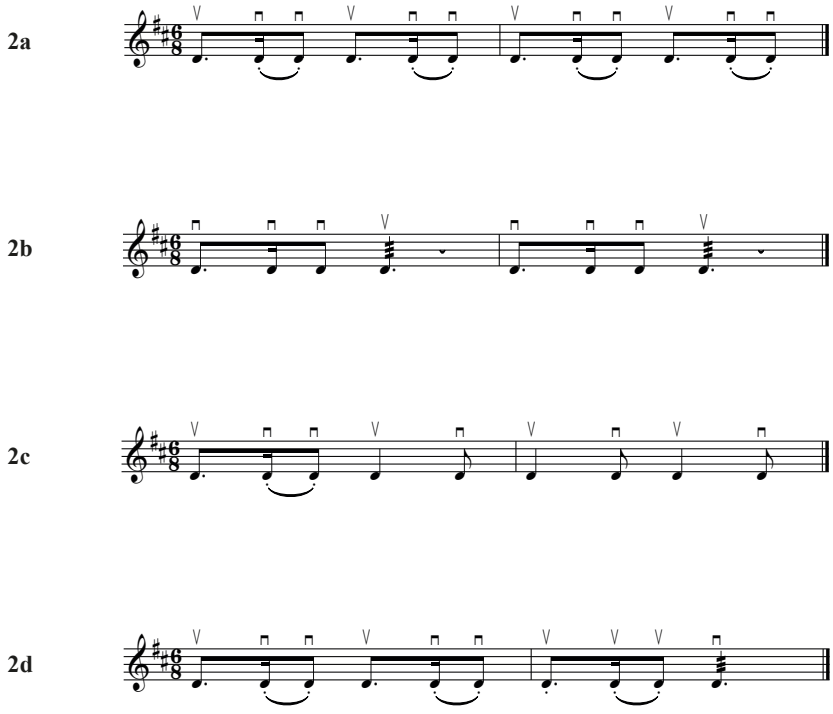


Figure 1 Muiñeira nova.

On the tambourine this is normally played with an open palm, pulling the drumhead away from the fingertips with a turn which helps to lengthen the first quaver. On fiddle, with the

bow, the player lets the hair off the string in the same way, bringing about a quick rebound for the second quaver, which will be shortened as a result.
These main styles of muiñeira nova can be reproduced with a ricochet stroke using the upper quarter of the bow.

Figure 2 Muiñeira nova with a ricochet stroke.



To reproduce the tambourine thumb or finger *roll,* indicated by a *tremolo* symbol, we will make the bow bounce, moving it back and forth. More or less pressure should be applied with the index finger depending on the desired number of bounces.

Muiñeira Vella

In this type of *muiñeira* the percussion maintains a steady 6/8 rhythm but it sounds 3/8 because there is no difference between the first part of the bar and the second one. At the same time, the singing is in 5/8 time simultaneously, which results in a polyrhythm that is characteristic of this energetic dance. The stress pattern is different here. Using a three-syllable word stressed on the penultimate syllable like 'together' *(TA-TA-RA)*, we can learn this pattern, which both on the tambourine and with the bow requires great concentration in order to maintain a steady rhythm and avoid switching to the pattern of a *muiñeira nova*.

These *muiñeiras vellas* are typically played with a clenched fist. The *muiñeira vella* genre, as well as its accompanying dances, is considered to date further back than the *muiñeira nova*.

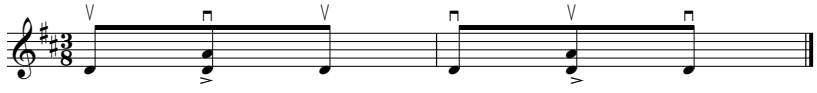


Figure 3 Muiñeira vella.

In order to play this rhythm easily it is advisable to use a *sautillé* in the middle of the bow, making the most of its bouncing but keeping it close to the strings in order to reproduce the accents of the tambourine. The chop is also a good stroke to play this rhythm. In the province of A Coruña, both the *muiñeira vella* and a particular style of *muiñeira nova* (known as *riscada*), are played on the tambourine simultaneously.[8]

Jotas

This is the most widespread dance in Spain, and it adopts different features in every region. It is a ternary rhythm, and we find jotas in both the bagpipe and the tambourine repertoires. There are also subclasses (*foliada*, *maneo*, *chouteira*, and *fandango*) as well as many local varieties, all of which demand different tambourine strokes and dance steps. This rhythm works very well on the fiddle, both when double stops are used to reinforce the rhythmic pattern and when the *tamboril*[9] and tambourine strokes are imitated. The basic pattern of the jota is shown in Figure 4. 'X' Indicates, in tambourine notation, a stroke with a clenched fist; On the fiddle, we reproduce it as a double stop with an off the string staccato:

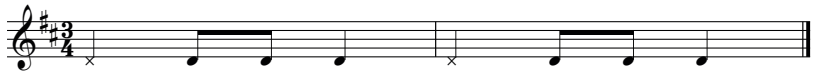


Figure 4a Jota – basic pattern.

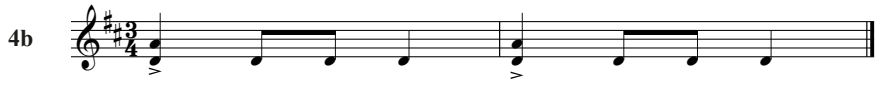
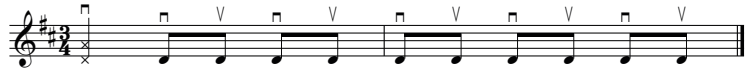


Figure 4b-h Other jota rhythmic patterns.

4c



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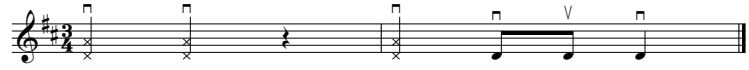

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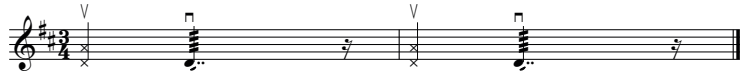
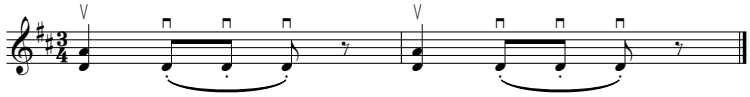


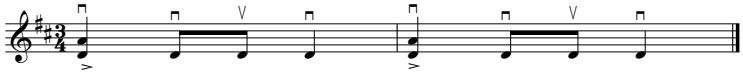
Performing them with the bow: 1/ ricochet

4f



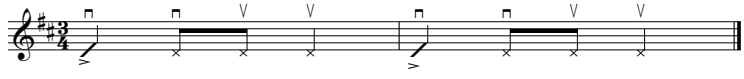
Performing them with the bow: 2/ sautillé

4g



Performing them with the bow: 3/ chop

4h



Pasodoble

This is a cheek-to-cheek dance with a binary 2/4 rhythm. It is very popular and widespread in the whole of Spain. In the Galician variety the melodies are usually in major mode, and they are clearly influenced by songs brought back from Mexico by emigrants. They are an essential part of the bagpipe repertoire. This rhythm is very easy to play, either with a ricochet using the tip of the bow, or with a *sautillé* in the centre. Its simplicity makes it a great rhythm to be practiced in beginner lessons:

Figure 5a Pasodoble ricochet.

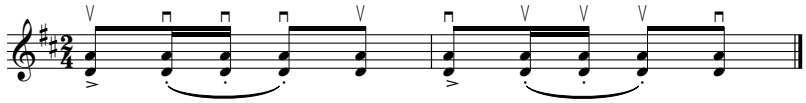
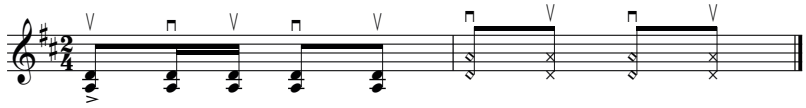


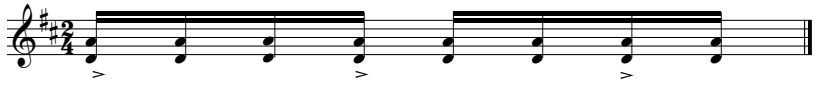
Figure 5b Pasodoble chop.



Rumba

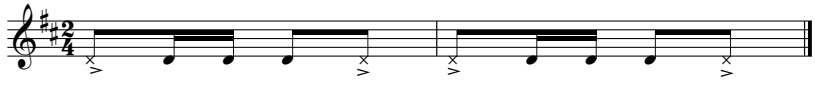
The rumba from Cuba became popular in the 1950s and was adopted by bagpipers faced with the need to include the hits of the moment in their repertoires; there was great rivalry at the time between them and the newly-arrived jazz-band orchestras that in few years displaced bagpipers, reducing them to the lowest status among musicians until the revival of consciousness about folk music in the 1980s.[10] In the bagpipe repertoire the rumba adopted a form very similar to the original, maintaining a 2/4 rhythm with an irregular accent that lends it a Latin groove; this was very innovative at the time.

Figure 6a Rumba pipers' style.



In rural areas, this new rhythm was not found easy to play on the tambourine, so it developed into a regularly-accented 2/4, closer to *pasodoble* than a rumba.

Figure 6b Rumba – tambourine rhythm with accented 2/4.



Pasadoble

Therefore, a rumba is played differently nowadays depending on whether it is performed by singers/tambourine players or by percussionists accompanying bagpipes, who maintain the original accent. Due to this, when accompanying with the bow the *rumbas* interpreted by *pandereteiras,* a *pasodoble* pattern is used.[11] With a *sautillé* in the centre of the bow the result is a good Latin groove; the chop for the rumba works also really well.

Teaching method

We all know how long it takes for a beginner fiddler to acquire the necessary technical level to join in a session or to play for other people to dance. Learning to play the fiddle, however, can be relatively easy if the learner has a basic sense of rhythm and hearing; needless to say, the progress will be faster with constant practice. In our school, ETRAD (see Figure 7), as in all schools where the main objective is to allow students to enjoy music within a group no matter what their abilities. In teaching the fiddle we use a method that focuses on rhythm rather than on the melody during the first months. Thus, as soon as the students can hold the bow safely and place the first fingers on the fingerboard, they start practising the basic strokes of the different traditional rhythms, so that even after a few months' learning they can make progress at a pace that is similar to that of the singing and tambourine students. In this way our students can sing and play the violin from the very first months, and when they are required to play and sing more complex melodies at the same time – the way blind fiddlers traditionally used to – they can do it naturally, contrary to what usually happens when a trained violinist who has never sung before tries to do it.

Figure 7 Students at ETRAD.

Thanks to this teaching method our students learn the basic patterns of traditional music from the beginning; this is way before they can play the dances at a speed that allows people to dance. In subsequent stages, once they are able to interpret these melodies skilfully, the incorporation of double stops and the proper stress patterns will be much easier. Having

learned them from the beginning, they are able to introduce those features in order to achieve the Galician traditional music sound. Although at first we only make accompaniments using open strings in the keys of G and D, as soon as learners can use the first two fingers they can already harmonise melodies in C, the most common key for Galician bagpipes. Thus they can participate as an accompanying instrument that harmonises and reinforces the rhythmic pattern. Since the implementation of this system in our school, the number of students who have continued their studies after the first year has increased considerably. Eighty per cent of those who commenced the basic cycle finished their studies, while in previous years only thirty per cent of them did so. This success is due mainly to the fact that even students who are not particularly gifted can enjoy playing the fiddle, and they take part in group music activities using few resources, thus contributing, together with more advanced students, to a more rounded music experience. As well as improving the numbers staying on, the number of people who want to study fiddle has increased by more than 60 per cent, making the fiddle the fourth most popular instrument, after bagpipes, singing and percussion, whereas five years ago it was the least-requested subject in our school.

Figure 8 Idiophonic device ('jingle') attached to the bow.

In 2010, inspired by gypsies from Rajasthan who attach jingles to the bow to accompany the ancient melodies of their ethnic group, we started to work on a similar idea in order to mimic the tambourine. After various prototypes using different forms of jingles, we arrived at a simple device that, attached to the heel of the bow with a clip, allows us to reproduce tambourine strokes with the characteristic sound of the jingles (Figure 8). Thus we can emulate the sound of a tambourine but at a lower volume, which allows us to achieve a more suitable accompaniment for those occasions in which the loudness of the nine pairs of jingles of a typical tambourine would otherwise drown out the melody played by acoustic instruments.

Notes

[1] Blind fiddlers were professionals and played for a living, not solely for amusement.

[2] Dorothé Schubarth and Antón Santamarina's *Cancioneiro Popular Galego* (La Coruña: Fundación Pedro Barrié de la Maza, 1998), remains one of the most complete collections of Galician traditional music. There is an online version available at http://cancioneiro.fundacionbarrie.org/ [accessed June 2015].

[3] For a detailed description of these and other percussion instruments, see Arias P. Carpintero, *Os Instrumentos Musicais da Tradición Galega* (Ourense, Spain: Difusora de Letras, Artes e Ideas, 2010), or visit http://www.consellodacultura.org/asg/instrumentos/clasificacion/os-membranofonos/membranofonos-de-percusion/ [accessed June 2015].

[4] *Fiadeiros* were gatherings that used to take place mainly at peasants' homes in rural areas to spin thread, which developed into social events and became the germ of a rich cultural tradition and folklore.

[5] A. Franco and S. Pintos, *Cantigas Galegas*, 1992; P. Álvarez, *Florencio, o cego dos Vilares*, Do Fol Edicións, DF-013-CD, 1998.

[6] Examples of different types of muiñeiras can be found in Schubarth and Santamarina, *Cancioneiro Popular Galego*, as well as in Schubart and Santamarina's collection.

[7] *Cantareiras* is a term used to refer to female interpreters of traditional songs who accompany their singing playing the tambourine. They are also referred to as *pandereteiras*.

[8] For an example, see https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dYJjGLR7Wpg [accessed June 2015].

[9] A tamboril is a small drum that traditionally accompanies bagpipes.

[10] For more information on rumbas in the Galician traditional repertoire, see Luis Costa, 'Las Rumbas Olvidadas: Transculturalidad y Etnicización en la Música Popular Gallega', *Revista Transcultural de Música,* 8 (2004) at http://www.sibetrans.com/trans/publicaciones [accessed June 2015].

[11] *Pandereteiras* is another Galician word for *cantareiras*, women who sing traditional tunes while playing the tambourine or pandeireta.